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Japanese Lucky Almanacs and Their Knockoffs

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Japanese Lucky Almanacs and Their Knockoffs

Abstract

Essay on modern Japanese fortune-telling almanacs.

Keywords

Almanacs, Japan

Disciplines

Japanese Studies | Library and Information Science

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Nothing can more effectually contribute to the Cultivation & Improvement of a Country, the Wisdom, Riches, & Strength, Virtue and Piety, the Welfare & Happiness of a People, than a proper Education of Youth, by forming their Manners, imbuing

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Japanese Lucky Almanacs and Their Knockoffs

POSTED BY MICHAEL P. WILLIAMS IN POSTS

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divination, ephemera, 高島嘉右衛門, 高島易断, 高島曆, fortune-telling, I Ching, Japan, Japanese almanacs, Japanese astrology, Japanese books, Japanese calendars, Kaemon Takeshima, knockoffs, lucky almanacs, lucky calendars, Nine Star Ki, Rev. Shoji Honda Collection, Takashima Kaemon, 占い, 曆, 本田正静, 九星気学

Earlier this year, the Penn Libraries began accessioning [the collection of the late Reverend Shoji Honda \(1929-2015\)](#), generously donated to the University of Pennsylvania by his son Tamon Honda. Rev. Honda's collection is a mix of Japanese and English publications focusing largely on Shin Buddhism, but it also covers topics as diverse as Sanskrit language study, Japanese flower arrangement (ikebana), the works of author Shiba Ryōtarō, and local histories of Takatsuki, Osaka—the city in which Rev. Honda spent part of his youth. Many of these books are owned by no other library in the world. Some, like his mimeographed adaptations of short stories by [Akutagawa Ryūnosuke](#) and [Ogawa Mimei](#), are not just unique bibliographic treasures, but also a direct window into Rev. Honda's life and interests. And some of the items from the Reverend's library were utterly unanticipated.

Among these are two fortune-telling almanacs (*koyomi* 曆), dating from 1995 and 2011 respectively. These almanacs are filled with precise and elaborate octagonal diagrams outlining the lucky and unlucky directions of the compass rose according to one's "Nine Star Ki" profile—something like a zodiac sign determined by the year of one's birth—and daily calendars listing the luck predictions for those zodiac signs. The earlier work [Heisei 7-nen Takashima-reki](#)

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— Covers and sample spreads from Rev. Honda’s lucky almanacs, opened up to his Nine Star Ki profile, “Eight White Soil Star”.

平成七高島曆 [“1995 Takashima almanac”] has a quasi-religious copyright holder (or *zōhan* 蔵版) declared on the cover: Shinseikan 神正館, perhaps anglicizable as “The Hall of Divine Righteousness”. The latter *Heisei 23-nen unseireki* 平成二十三年運勢曆, or *2011 Calendar of Good Fortune*, on first glance appears to be the work of a more academic institution, Kōzan Rekishokan 黄山歴書館, or the “Huangshan Historical Library”. The names of their editorial bodies are also similar, invoking the family name Takashima. Despite their visual similarity, the economic forces behind the books appear vastly different. The 1995 *Takashima-reki* is a 32-page book that looks more like a giveaway than anything else; the 2011 *Unseireki* is an unmistakably commercial publication with a product code and a price of ¥100 published by Daiso, a well-known chain of 100-yen shops.

As with our recent collection of *Japanese cruise books*, we knew there was a hidden history here, and we immediately set out to acquire more exemplars of these fortune-telling almanacs: 33 in total. Curiously, none of these were published for years earlier than 1946, the first calendar year after Imperial Japan’s surrender to the Allies of World War II. But the history of almanacs in Japan dates back centuries (if not quite millennia).

Along with the increasing spread of print culture in the Edo period (1600-1868), so grew the means to publish calendars of practical information like the months and tides, and of less practical information like which days were lucky for what events. Writing about the illustrated ukiyoe almanacs (*egoyomi* 絵暦) of the Edo period in a 1929 issue of the *Apollo*, William H. Edmunds provides the following eurocentric takedown of their content:

“[...] how little importance was time in the olden days of Japan. Second or minutes were unknown, [...] days pass, but there were no weeks, and the months were just moons, numbered and named after the zodiacal signs, or by

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fanciful names indicative of a seasonal or festive observance [...]. Years were not counted in continuous sequence, but according to certain nengō, or year names, appointed by the Emperors arbitrarily, sometimes to commemorate an auspicious occasion or to ward off some malign influence; hence none could answer off-hand the number of years that had intervened between one period and another.”

Assuming the purpose of almanacs is simply to provide the mathematical precision required to calculate dates, then Edmunds is correct in his assessment. But the “fanciful names” and “seasonal observances” are essential to Japanese calendars and their various overlapping customs and superstitions. In a far less judgmental tone, Edmunds notes that official almanacs (*honreki* 本暦) were published in Ise, the seat of one of Japan’s most important Shinto shrines. Outside of the Ise region, specially licensed printers allowed to produce and distribute these products throughout the country. These *honreki*, however, did not suit everyone’s purposes. For one, they required a level of literacy not widespread. Secondly, they didn’t include information necessary for certain types of divination necessary for folk customs.

Thus underground presses secretly publishing *obakegoyomi* お化け暦, or “ghost almanacs” also operated. Some of these ghost almanacs were purely visual for the illiterate, like *egoyomi* featuring illustrations by the likes of artist Suzuki Harunobu 鈴木春信 (1725?-1770). While Harunobu seems to have taken advantage of a period in which publishers of ghost almanacs were tolerated, by the early years of the Meiji period (the mid-1870s), the Japanese government had renewed their commitment to a standardized almanac, this time based on the solar calendar. In eliminating the lunar calendar upon which so much of farm policy and folk custom relied, the Meiji government’s monopoly on calendar production once again invoked the specter of ghost almanacs. Titles like *Nōka benran* 農家便覧 [“The Farmer’s Handbook”] (1894) bundled in Nine Star Ki and lucky day divination. Publishers like Fukunaga Kahē 福永嘉兵衛—a name as

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fictitious as it is auspicious—began haunting the world of underground publishing.[1]



— Six postwar lucky almanac titles published from 1946 through 1962. Five different publishers are represented.

The official adoption of the solar calendar was just one of many steps Japan took to place itself on equal footing with the industrializing West. But modernization didn't reject the custom and superstition wholesale. In fact, some profited immensely from it. Enter Takashima Kaemon 高島嘉右衛門 (1832-1914), an entrepreneur who would effectively become a patron saint of fortune-telling. Takashima's lifetime interest in fortune-telling was centered largely around the I

Ching, or *Book of Changes*, and the interpretation of its 64 hexagrams. Takashima profited from his successful predictions, investing heavily in timber before the great earthquake of Ansei 2 [1855]. His fortunes didn't last long, as heavy debts and his attempts to overcome them through illegal dealings with foreigners landed Takashima in prison for seven years. During his imprisonment, he redoubled his commitment to studying the *I Ching*. After his release from prison, Takashima's fortunes once again grew, and he found himself financially supporting the ambitions of men in high places like Itō Hirobumi, a statesman who would go on to become Prime Minister.

Financial support wasn't Takashima's only goal. In Meiji 19 [1886] he had self-published a **ten-volume edition** of his own interpretation on the *I Ching* called *Takashima ekidan* 高島易断 ["Takashima's Judgements on the Book of Changes"]. Several revised editions followed. An English translation, *The Takashima ekidan*, was published in 1893. The book was clearly a hit, and people of influence sought advice from Japan's preeminent fortune-teller, who divined everything from cholera outbreaks to colonial upheaval through *I Ching* cleromancy. In his dual position as industrialist and soothsayer, Takashima never profited directly by selling his fortunes as a trade. His name has become associated with the playful aphorism *Uranai wa uranai* 占いは売らない: "Fortune-telling is not for sale".

But it didn't take long for others to capitalize on his fame. So appeared titles like the 1908 *Jinsei ichidai unki* 人生一代運氣 ("A Lifetime of Fortune"), published by the "Takashima Ekidan Official Research Group", and the 1912 *Takashima Ekidan shisei kantsūhō* 高島易断至誠感通法 ("A Method for the Sincere Impartation of *Takashima Ekidan*"), published by the "Takashima Ekidan Center" (Takashima Ekidansho 高島易断所) and hawking titles under the imprint Jingūkan 神宮館 ("Shrine Hall"). While both of these books feature portraits of Takashima, they are completely different in content than any of Takashima's own works. Rather than revealing the exacting interpretation of the 64 hexagrams, they are a hodgepodge of Nine Star Ki divination, physiognomy, and palmistry. Just where was this stuff coming from?

By the publication of "A Lifetime of Fortune", over 150 books had been published on the topic of Nine Star Ki, and hundreds more on fortune-telling in general.[2]

(Remember that most of these books were legal, or at least titled to appear so: It was *almanacs* that were regulated by law). Among these publications, versions of Nine Star Ki octagonal charts had already appeared, and were already tacitly associated with the hexagrams through which Takashima made his fortunes.^[3] It is very likely that this association led less-than-scrupulous publishers to release popular divination manuals under the Takashima brand.

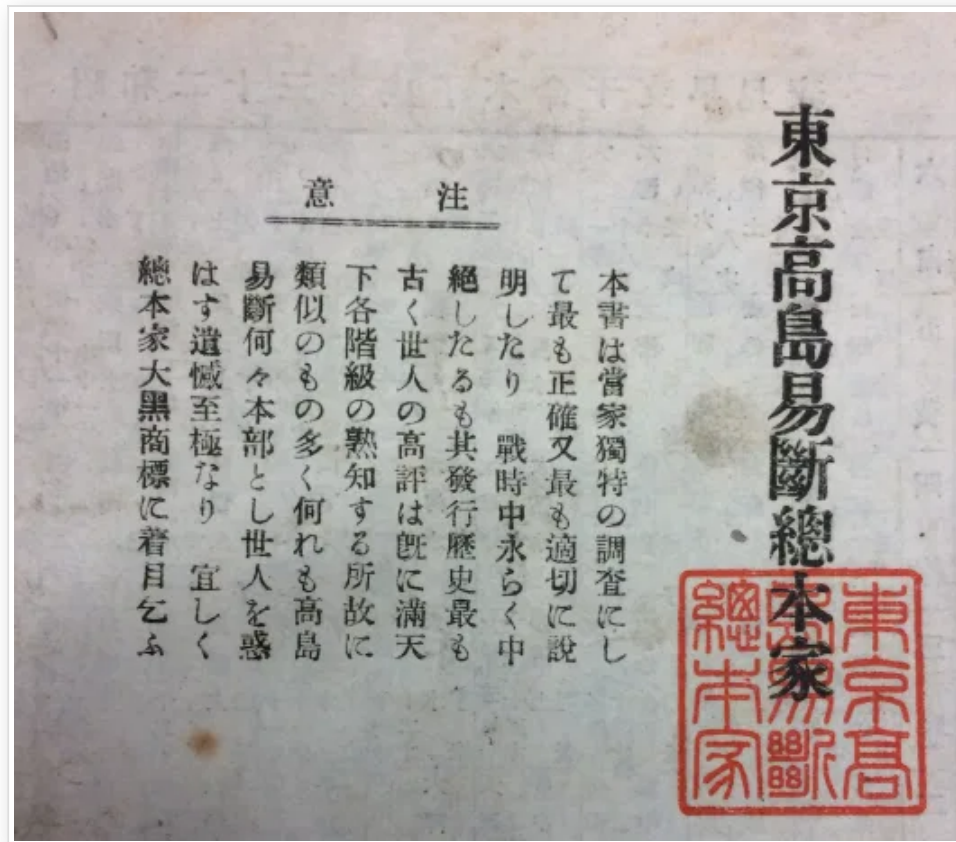
The knockoffs of the early 1900s appear to be the forerunners for the postwar almanacs now in Penn's collection, both in content and in their unlicensed use of the Takashima's name. In fact, every single lucky almanac in Penn's collection uses the words "Takashima" or "Takashima Ekidan" in the name of their compilers. One of these, *Jingūkan gokahō* 神宮館御家寶 appears to be a distant descendant of the 1912 "Method for the Sincere Impartation of *Takashima Ekidan*", in both compiler (Takashima Ekidansho) and imprint (Jingūkan). Similarly, these quasi-religious imprint names have proliferated as well. Penn's collection of almanacs encompasses five:

- Jingūkan 神宮館 ("Shrine Hall")
- Shin'eikan 神榮館 ("Hall of Divine Glory")
- Shinseikan 神正館 ("Hall of Divine Righteousness")
- another Shinseikan 神誠館 ("Hall of Divine Truth")
- Shinshōkan 神祥館 ("Hall of Divine Auspice")

More examples exist in the world: Shin'ekikan 神易館 ("Hall of Divine Divination"), *Shinmeikan* 神明館 ("Hall of Divine Brightness"), *Shinreikan* 神靈館 ("Hall of Divine Spirit"), Shin'yōkan 神陽館 ("Hall of the Divine Sun"), and even a third *Shinseikan* 神聖館 ("Hall of Sanctity").^[4]

The resemblances don't stop with names. These books are so similar in size, design, and layout they are near-fungible. Like the *many imitators of the famous Tachikawa Bunko* in our juvenile fiction collection, here we see books camouflaging themselves as each other. But whereas Tachikawa Bunko proved itself to be the leading publisher of its own genre, there is no clear original for these almanacs.

Only one title in our collection stands out in appearance and its refusal to use a



— “1948 Treasure Almanac” edited by “the Takashima Head Family” warning users not to be fooled by imitators misusing the Takashima name.

divinely inspired imprint, *Shōwa 23-nen hōreki* 昭和二十三年寶曆 (“1948 Treasure Almanac”), edited by “the Takashima Head Family”. The back cover of this publication features a warning not to be misled by imitators calling themselves the “Takashima Ekidan Official Group of Whatever”, and urges the reader to only buy products with their trademark. Of course, this all appears to be a ruse, and no proof of this publisher’s authenticity is given. While this almanac appears to be out of print, other pretenders for the Takashima name have put forth their evidence.

That third Shinseikan, the “Hall of Sanctity”, offers a *statement of proof*—and one can’t help but smile at a page called “proof.html”—as well as a *history page*

showing off an impressive-looking lineage all the way back to Takashima Kaemon himself. Meanwhile, the “Takashima Ekidan Head Family”, publishers of *Takashima honreki* 高島本暦 (“The Takashima Official Almanac”), offer **their own lineage**, which diverges from Shinseikan’s at the fifth generation of successors. But even the text between these two competitors’ pages is identical in some places. Have these imitators really imitated each other to prove their own authenticities?

Meanwhile, that long-running imprint **Jingūkan** claims no affiliation with the Takashima name, simply offering a history dating back to Meiji 41 [1908] and specimens of almanacs dating back to Taishō 15 [1926]. Shin’eikan, another publisher still active, similarly offers a history of “**over 100 years of publishing almanacs**” with no mention of the Takashima name in its history. (Nor do they mention that at least 8 of their almanac titles published from 1938-1939 were seized and banned by the Home Ministry Criminal Affairs Bureau for being pornographic or disruptive to law and order)[5]. Despite no direct claim to Takashima, both publishers, of course, still adorn their covers with his name.



— Lucky almanacs for 2017 on sale at a bookstore in Hamamatsu Station, Shizuoka Prefecture, Japan. Image courtesy Taku Watanabe.

Japan's defeat in World War II brought many changes to the country and administration. One of these small changes was the end of the government monopoly of almanacs. As of 1946, the ghost almanacs were free to haunt the bookstores of Japan, each with their own immaterial claims on authenticity, gradually coming to imitate each other in shape, form, and function.

In a surprising turn of events, it is the almanac published by Daiso, the cheapest of the bunch, that proves to be the least disingenuous. Yes, its compiler invokes the hallowed name of *Takashima ekidan*, and yes, the "Huangshan Historical Library" appears to be more of a "ghost library" than an actual, physical institute. Even the purported head of this phantom library, Abe Sūmei 安倍数名, appears to be a fictitious character named after the famed fortune-teller of classical Japan, Abe no Seimei 安倍晴明 (921-1005). But Abe Sūmei's profile (fake as it may be) contains the most honesty these almanacs offer: Abe, a computer scientist, simply became interested in the work of Takashima Kaemon as well as hemerology, and combined his skill and studies to create the almanac [now in our collection](#).

We're grateful to both the Rev. Shojo Honda and his son Tamon for providing us with the building blocks for this collection of almanacs. While we ourselves can't predict the future, we hope that these materials inspire scholars and support research for generations to come.

[1] The name 福永嘉兵衛 includes multiple characters associated with good fortune. The surname Fukunaga 福永 conveys the sense of "good fortune for eternity", and the forename Kahē 嘉兵衛 combines the character Ka 嘉 ("fortune", "auspicious") with a contemporary popular male forename suffix -hē 兵衛, a style of naming that has since fallen out of favor.

[2] I searched the National Diet Library's OPAC for titles including the term "九星" ("nine star") published by 1908. Likely other such titles on the topic appeared without overtly mentioning the word 九星 in their titles. NDL's mammoth bibliography *Meiji kankō tosho mokuroku* 明治刊行図書目録 lists roughly 750 titles on the topic of divination, geomancy, and physiognomy published in the entire Meiji period.

[3] It's difficult to pinpoint exactly when creators began to connect the two, and to develop the octagonal charts that are regular features of Nine Star Ki publications. The 1881 *Hattaku meikyō zukai* 八宅明鏡図解 ("Pictorial Explication of the Bright Mirror of the Eight Houses") shows a clearly developed relationship between Nine Star Ki profiles and an octagon layout. The 1895 *Kyūsei kudenroku* 九星口伝録 ("An Oral Record of the Nine Stars") is far less visual, but connects Nine Star Ki and the octagonal layouts of hexagrams.

[4] A few of these publishers are still up and running. Some seemed to have folded. "Shin'ekikan" was sourced from a microfilm curiously held by the Family History Library in Salt Lake City. Library of Congress holds three Shin'yōkan titles in its Naimushō Keihokyoku censorship collection (see footnote 5).

[5] The Library of Congress's collection of Japanese censored materials and documents consists of titles collected by various agencies of the Japanese Empire before its surrender to the Allies. These titles were brought to the Library of Congress during the American occupation of Japan and microfilmed. The bulk of lucky almanacs appear to be in reel 6 of MOJ 78, a collection of censored Japanese publications dating before 1946. Shin'eikan's almanacs for 1939 (published in 1938) includes lucky days for sexual intercourse and were thus censored as "pornography" (*fūzoku* 風俗). The almanacs for 1940 (published in 1939) contain predictions on bad crops of wheat and rice and were censored as "corrupting to law and order" (*annei chitsujo binran* 安寧秩序紊乱).

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About Michael P. Williams

Michael is the library specialist for the Japanese and Korean collections at the University of Pennsylvania Libraries. He has written Chrono Trigger for Boss Fight Books (where he serves as associate editor), and his shorter work has appeared in The Atlantic, The Appendix, and the Journal of East Asian Libraries.

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